*Melvin Haywood*
*Portrait by Kuni Takahashi*
*Commissioned by KC Clarke on behalf of Safer Foundation*

# Paper Thin Thing

## On Testimony, Distance, and the Lyric Mask

A poem can carry something for a little while that it does not want to keep. It closes in on emotions, images, experiences, or truths, then lets them go for the reader to carry. Just as a judge does not have to stand inside the house to know what happened there, a reader does not have to possess an experience in order to receive what the poem has carried.

In an animal cruelty case, the room itself often has to be reconstructed in court, knowing the defense attorney will try to tear it apart, piece by piece, until it seems the room was never there. The judge does not enter the room where there is no clean place to step. The prosecutor does not breathe the ammonia. The jury does not stand in the house where the floor has disappeared beneath waste, where a dead cat is caught between the refrigerator and the wall, where a mummified cat sits near one still half alive. Most of the people who will later decide the case encounter harm from a distance. They receive it through testimony.

This is one of justice's central recognitions. Human beings are often required to know what they did not personally endure. The humane officer enters the room. The veterinarian examines the body. The photographs hold part of the scene. The report carries another part. The affidavit brings the room into legal form. The judge listens from elsewhere and must still decide. Court receives the house in pieces: the officer's report, the veterinarian's findings, the photographs, the affidavit, the smell described under oath. None of this is the house itself. It is the house translated into evidence, then tested by argument. The translation is imperfect, but it is also the only way the room can travel.

Justice depends on the possibility that knowledge can travel from the witness to those who were not there. But travel requires form. The humane officer cannot say to the prosecutor, "You were not there, so you have no right to question me." The witness matters because the witness entered the room. But witness is not sovereignty. Experience gives authority and also responsibility. The room has to become receivable. This structure does not erase the experience. It gives the experience a way to travel. Someone enters the harm. Someone else must listen.

The serious poem does not ask to be believed simply because it was felt or imagined. It has to survive its own making. It has to pass through image, rhythm, mask, line, pressure, silence, and structure. The poem, like any work of art, is tested by form the way testimony is tested by procedure. Form is what gives the charge somewhere to go.

We live in a culture that often treats this arrangement with suspicion. The culture says, in one form or another, you cannot understand what you have not personally lived. There is truth in that. A person who has not been in combat does not know combat from inside the body of the soldier. A person who has not lived inside a concentration camp does not know that terror from inside the body of the prisoner. A person who has not lived under racial threat, sexual violence, addiction, poverty, or persecution does not know those realities as the person who endured them knows them. That difference is real. It should be honored.

Truth becomes false when it hardens into prohibition. We mistake the limits of experience for the limits of knowledge. We mistake the authority of witness for ownership of meaning. Ethical caution matters, and a person should take care when near another person's experience or suffering. But caution can harden into a dead doctrine. It begins to say that no one may know, imagine, receive, speak from, or be changed by what another person carried. Then testimony loses its purpose. Witness becomes a locked room.

A combat veteran can speak about war so that others might understand something without entering war. A humane officer can testify so a judge might know enough to judge without entering the house. A survivor can speak so the horror does not remain sealed inside the body that first bore it. A former prisoner can warn young men about the road they think they are choosing freely. A family can carry a story across generations. A reader can be changed by fiction. A listener can be changed by oral history. A poem can carry pressure from what it has seen, heard, feared, inherited,

imagined, or morally recognized. None of this erases distance. It makes distance morally active.

I met General William Levine as we began trying to piece together his story, though vascular dementia had made him an unreliable witness to his own life. I edited *The General: William Levine, Citizen Soldier and Liberator*, the book about his service during the Second World War, his time investigating the Dachau concentration camp, and what followed.

Levine did not live Dachau as an inmate. He did not possess that suffering. But his duty was to receive it. He interviewed inmates and guards. He documented atrocity, including the degraded moral realities inside the camp system itself. Guard against inmate. Inmate against inmate. Terror as a structure. Atrocity as a world.

If we say he could not understand anything because he had not personally endured Dachau, then his inquiry becomes meaningless. Worse, the testimony of those he interviewed becomes meaningless, because testimony exists in order to travel beyond the body that first bore the experience.

By the time his own story became a book, Levine could no longer carry it by himself. His memory had become partial, unreliable, broken by illness. The record had to carry what the man could no longer hold. Military documents, interviews, family memory, photographs, and prior accounts had to reconstruct the life of a man who had once reconstructed atrocity from the testimony of others.

Levine did not know Dachau from inside the prisoner's body. He knew through witness, evidence, inquiry, and documentation, and through moral imagination. Later, others knew Levine through similar means. The knowledge was partial. It was mediated. It was still necessary.

My wife's grandfather served with the 1st Marines, 1st Marine Division, among the early Marines of the Second World War. He fought at Guadalcanal and Peleliu. He was a mortarman, the same role later carried into one of the central written records of the Pacific war. Even among Marines, those men were understood to have endured some of the worst fighting. He came home, but the war came with him. It entered his drinking, his sleep, his marriage, his body. In dreams he became violent and hurt the woman lying beside him. The battlefield crossed into the marriage bed.

I did not fight on those islands. My wife did not fight on those islands. But the knowledge did not remain sealed inside the man who did. It passed through family memory as damage, warning, grief, and explanation. It passed into a bottle of Jim Beam he somehow managed not to drink, a bottle we still have to this day. That is one way witness travels. Sometimes it arrives as testimony. Sometimes it arrives as a story told after the fact. Sometimes it arrives as damage in the next room.

My grandfather was an ordnance specialist and served as an armorer for P-38s. His unit, the 401st Fighter Squadron, received presidential citations. He moved from Airstrip 1 on

the beaches of Normandy through the improvised airfields of the European war. When his travel record reached the Battle of the Bulge, he wrote one word: whew. That was all. He never talked about it.

The word is hardly testimony in the ordinary sense. It explains nothing. It gives no scene, no weather, no fear, no dead, no machinery, no cold. And yet it carries the pressure of what he never said, a small rupture in the document, a breath where history bled through.

Poetry recognizes that kind of witness. It can do with one word what my grandfather did with *whew*. Silence can be full. A fragment may carry what direct speech cannot bear. A single word can become the place where experience touches the edge of language and stops. Some witness is speech. Some witness is damage. Some witness is refusal. Some witness is a mark left where the sentence failed.

Years ago, when I worked at Safer Foundation, I spoke with Melvin Haywood. He had spent decades in the Illinois prison system, including time at Tamms. Men were not sent to Tamms casually. It was where the state placed people it considered among the hardest to manage, the most dangerous, the most disruptive, or the most politically charged. Haywood had lived consequence at a scale most people never approach.

He told me that, in his memory, the Gangster Disciples had not begun as a criminal enterprise. They began as protection, as neighborhood organization, as a way to gather strength where power had been denied or withdrawn. Then came the underground economy. Then came the logic that follows appetite when appetite learns to govern. Protection became control. Loyalty became enforcement. The neighborhood became both the reason and the casualty.

He carried that knowledge back to the street. He tried to speak from consequence. He tried to tell younger men something about what the street cost. And they told him, “Gramps, you had your time. This is our time now.”

He brought the knowledge back. They would not take it. The refusal had its own hunger. Knowledge can be passed from one human being to another, but it cannot be forced into another person’s moral imagination. Testimony can travel. It can warn, plead, explain, confess, mourn. But the listener can still say no. The listener can still insist on learning the hard way.

So much depends on the possibility that people can learn from others, even when they resist the lesson. A person can receive a warning without repeating the life that produced it. That is what testimony offers, whether it arrives in court, in family memory, or in a poem: the chance to know before becoming the evidence. Testimony is witness made receivable.

When that possibility fails, experience becomes the only permitted teacher. Warning loses its power. Testimony becomes secondary to damage. We are living with that failure

now, as people discard what parents and grandparents learned through two successive world wars and treat inherited warning as sentiment, weakness, or old restraint.

Some of this is forgetfulness. Some of it is appetite. Avarice in pursuit of power has little use for testimony, because testimony places limits on what appetite may excuse. The young man enters the violence to learn what violence costs. The reader is asked to suffer before harm can be believed. This is repetition disguised as authenticity.

Witness also travels by other means. Poetry has always given shape to forces. Ships, countries, virtues, storms, death, justice, liberty, hunger, and war all come to us through figures. The figure lets the force appear. Bad criticism snatches the figure, empties it of force, and makes it perform a simpler morality play. What was appetite becomes accusation. What was power becomes representation. The devouring continues unseen. But some forces deserve their old names. Cruelty remains cruelty even when it arrives with an explanation. Damage may explain the path, but it does not make the suffering unreal.

I remember standing in a church on the South Side of Chicago. Behind the altar, on the wall above it, there was a two- or three-story image of Jesus. He was Black. The image has stayed with me. It was not a claim about the forensic appearance of the historical Jesus. It was a devotional act of recognition. In order for the ministry to become present to that congregation, Christ had to arrive in a form they could recognize as near their own.

This is not outside the faith. It is deep inside it. Jesus does not care what he looks like. No image of Jesus is the point in itself. The witness of the ministry is the point. The mercy, the suffering, the betrayal, the body, the wound, the resurrection, the call. The image is one way that witness travels. Embodiment matters. Recognition matters. Form matters. The image is not the historical body. It is not trying to steal the historical body. It is a means by which witness becomes receivable.

The lyric works from a related mystery. A poem can carry pressure from an event while remaining a made thing beside it. It can stand near the battlefield, the prison yard, the hoarded house, the camp, the courtroom, the veteran's body, the animal's body, or the historical life of another person. It watches at an angle, receives what passes through those places and figures, and conducts what it cannot keep.

Lyric masks give distance a discipline. Artistic conceits give pressure a structure to move through. The lyric speaker belongs to the poem's construction, not simply to the poet's biography. The mask gives the poem a way out of the tyranny of self-witness, a form of witness beyond self-exposure.

The poem does not always touch the live wire directly. Sometimes it builds a field around the current. Sometimes it lets the voltage move through mask, figure, rhythm, grotesque, or invented speech. The truth arrives by conduction rather than contact.

Flawed criticism mistakes the poem's charge for a permissions problem. It treats the mask as evidence, the figure as confession, the speaker as biography, and the poem as a document of virtue or guilt. It stops reading the force moving through the poem and begins sorting the speaker.

Lyric poetry often begins before verdict, where pressure has not yet settled into position. It gives form to what feels ugly, unstable, inadmissible, inherited, feared, distorted, or only partly understood. Charged material enters as image, rhythm, mask, voice, and scene, rather than confession, accusation, permission, or proof.

*Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* and *The Groaning Book: A Poetics* stand beside one another as a dual literary object. The poetics argues that the lyric carries charge by conduction rather than contact. This essay carries that argument out of the poem and into the courtroom, the camp, the bedroom, the airstrip, the prison yard, and the church. In those places, conduction is not a figure. It is how knowledge reaches people who were not there.

The lyric stands at a distance and keeps its attention there. It may carry horror, disgust, anger, grief, accusation, dread, tenderness, pity, revulsion, or love. Its moral pressure comes through form rather than verdict. Judgment closes a case. The lyric stays with what judgment would simplify.

The lyric remains beside what judgment cannot settle. Distance stays because distance is part of the truth. The reader arrives after the fact. The poet may arrive by memory, imagination, inheritance, or fear. The speaker may be a mask, the scene invented, the figure composite, mythic, grotesque, historical, remembered, or dreamed. The poem can still carry something real.

Joyce Kilmer's "Rouge Bouquet" gives this argument its clearest closing form. In Kilmer's world, poetry still held a public place as witness. He came from a kind of family in which vocation had room. He could choose poetry, journalism, criticism, lecturing, and literary work as plainly as another man might choose carpentry. Poetry had a civic and professional shape. It was work.

He carried that work with him when he entered the war. He went where he thought he belonged. For him, the poet and the soldier were joined. He carried his vocation into the regiment and toward the dead, declining the officer's distance to remain with the enlisted men, the people whose life he had chosen to share.

"Rouge Bouquet" commemorates men of his own regiment killed in March 1918 when a German shell collapsed their dugout in the Rouge Bouquet woods. Kilmer wrote the poem within days, and it was read by Chaplain Francis Duffy at the memorial service held near the place of their death. Later that year, Kilmer was killed near the Ourcq River during the Second Battle of the Marne.

The poem has continued to serve as an act of remembrance. Its endurance does not come from documentary completeness. It comes from lyric form.

Kilmer was there. He had proximity, standing, and the authority of contact. Yet he did not write a forensic account of the shell, the dugout, the bodies, the dig, or the failed rescue. He wrote a lyric elegy. He gave the dead a bugle-call for a voice, and a ritual form by which their deaths could become receivable to people who were not in that forest.

Kilmer stood close enough to write the literal scene, and still chose distance inside proximity. Four months later, he was dead, and what remained was the poem: the made thing through which the dead could travel.

That is the lyric, a paper thin thing. It holds what it cannot keep. It keeps faith with what passed through it and carries the charge forward.

**Rouge Bouquet**

Joyce Kilmer

In a wood they call the Rouge Bouquet
There is a new-made grave today,
Built by never a spade nor pick,
Yet covered with earth ten meters thick.
There lie many fighting men,
Dead in their youthful prime,
Never to laugh nor love again
Or taste of the summer time;
For death came flying through the air
And stopped his flight at the dugout stair,
Touched his prey -
And left them there -
Clay to clay.
He hid their bodies stealthily
In the soil of the land they sought to free,
And fled away.
Now over the grave abrupt and clear
Three volleys ring;
And perhaps their brave young spirits hear
The bugle sing:
“Go to sleep!
Go to sleep!
Slumber well where the shell screamed and fell.
Let your rifles rest on the muddy floor,
You will not need them any more.
Danger’s past;
Now at last,
Go to sleep!”

There is on earth no worthier grave
To hold the bodies of the brave

Than this place of pain and pride
Where they nobly fought and nobly died.
Never fear but in the skies
Saints and angels stand
Smiling with their holy eyes
On this new-come band.
St. Michael's sword darts through the air
And touches the aureole on his hair
As he sees them stand saluting there,
His stalwart sons;
And Patrick, Brigid, Columkill
Rejoice that in veins of warriors still
The Gael's blood runs.
And up to Heaven's doorway floats,
From the wood called Rouge Bouquet
A delicate cloud of bugle notes
That softly say:
"Farewell!
Farewell!
Comrades true, born anew, peace to you!
Your souls shall be where the heroes are
And your memory shine like the morning-star.
Brave and dear,
Shield us here.
Farewell!"

"Rouge Bouquet" is in the public domain.